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Curtiss Hoffman

Bridgewater State College, c1hoffman@bridgew.edu

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BENEATH OUR FEET

5 Scenes From JOHNSON #1 North Taunton, Massachusetts*

By Curtiss Hoffman

Scene One:

An open meadow, in early fall

Time:

About 4000 years ago

A small family group, consisting of perhaps 12 hardy, tanned men, women, and children, is camped on the flat crest of a sandy knoll overlooking a meandering stream. They have constructed a small round house for their dwelling, about nine meters across, by driving sharpened saplings into the ground and lashing together the tops; the intervening spaces have been patched with bark and hides. They have moved into this area for the fall season, moving downstream one kilometer from their major base.

Their reasons for coming to the region are complex, and perhaps not clearly understood even by themselves. Throughout the millenium before their time, populations in southern New England have been increasing, making the most of the favorable environmental conditions that accompanied the complete retreat of the glaciers from the North American Continent. The climate was actually warmer than it is today, approximately that of modern North Carolina. As populations increased, they eventually filled the best zones, along the major rivers and lakes, where the foods upon which human groups relied were most easily available. At the same time, the encroaching sea, filled with meltwater from the receding glaciers, had submerged many hundreds of square kilometers of coastline. These forces, as well as a pioneering opportunism, led groups throughout the region to move into the interior, upland zone which they had visited previously only on short forays.



JOHNSON #1

Burnt Rock Alignment

**The following scenarios, it should be understood, represent (with the obvious exception of the last) a combination of careful analysis, comparisons with other sites in the region, and a healthy proportion of speculation on the part of the author. The data upon which they are based is a part of a report produced under a Faculty Development Grant.*

During the last century or so, however, environmental conditions have definitely taken a turn for the worse. The climate has become so hot that many of the large, shallow lakes which dot this relatively flat region have become swamps or peatbogs; and much of the forest cover has been replaced by scrub. The environment resembles somewhat that of modern Cape Cod, with some stands of nut trees--oak, beech, and hazel--mixed with white pine and birch. The decrease in nut trees, and the unreliability of their yield cycles, have reduced the animal populations which depend on these resources for survival--particularly white-tailed deer and turkey, both mainstays of the diet for these people. Under these conditions, the interior groups have been forced to adopt a survival strategy which involves the establishment of a permanent base camp and several minor satellite camps at short distances from the base, used by small splinter groups from the main group for relatively short periods of time. This is an effective strategy for subsisting in an environment which no longer provides an abundance of any one particular resource. It

increases the chances that at least some of the satellite camps will succeed in finding sufficient amounts of diverse resources which can be stored and later used to feed the entire local group. Johnson #1 is one such satellite camp.

The group occupying the site is intimately familiar with the resources of the area, and, probably through its contact with the base camp, has at its disposal trade connections with much of eastern Massachusetts. Felsite, a dark-colored volcanic stone quarried from the Blue Hills and Attle-

borough, makes up a significant part of their tool kit, as well as local stream cobbles of quartz, and slate/shale derived from boulders washed up on the shores of Winneconnet Pond nearby. One of the men in the group is occupied in manufacturing stone tools from these materials. He has made several spear points of a style he learned while at the base camp—relatively narrow, with broad tapering or squared stems, a type which has lasted in the area for about 3000 years. His finished products are somewhat asymmetrical, not particularly pleasing to our eyes, but functional nevertheless. While the other men are hunting with these simple tools for the scarce game, the women gather local wild seeds and nuts, particularly hazel nuts, to store for their return to base in the winter ahead. Hazel seems to have been a very important resource; the nuts were charred in fire prior to storage or consumption, and must have been a real windfall for this particular group: wild hazel trees only have maximal yields every fifth year, on the average. In addition to these activities, the women prepare deer hides for winter clothing using stone scrapers and knives made by the men; they also prepare the food by heating stones in the camp firepits, and then dropping them into skin and fibre bags filled with a mixture of gathered grasses, seeds, roots, and meat. While life in general is far from easy, the population is not yet at a point where it is really stressed by the environmental changes taking place around it. Instead, it has adapted to those changes rapidly, making a virtue of necessity wherever possible.

* * *

Scene Two:

A cleared field, in mid-fall

Time:

About 1200 years ago

A somewhat larger group of people, perhaps 30, prepares to celebrate the harvest festival. They have spent the summer and early fall here, some members of the group having arrived first in the spring to fell the trees with stone celts and to burn off the underbrush from the fields before planting. They have tended their crops of maize, sunflowers, and squash; now they reap the benefits of their labor. While the land is not especially fertile, it is at least flat, and is sufficient to serve the needs of this relatively small group. The climate has ameliorated during the past 1800 years; a cool, moist trend has brought about the return of many species of plants and animals in abundance.

The men have brought down several white-tailed deer, which they are in the

process of butchering. They use quartz knives and scrapers to divide the meat into portions for cooking, and fist-sized cobbles for crushing the bones to extract the tasty marrow. Later they will roast the deer meat on a large platform of heated rocks. The women are preparing crude vessels of clay and wood for serving and storage of seeds. The climate has stabilized to nearly that of the present, and one result of this is the settlement of soft-shell clam populations in flat shore areas. While Johnson #1 is 20 miles from the nearest of these, some shell has made its way this far inland to be used as a tempering agent for the pottery. A prosperous people, these occupants have established trade connections, using dugout canoes to travel the waterways, as far distant as Pennsylvania, from which they



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have obtained (through many intermediaries) a small quantity of brightly colored chert from which their best edged tools are made. They are also a people who can afford the luxury of a little fine adornment; their chief wears stone pendants around his neck, bored through for attachment of rawhide thongs. Their social order is no longer the egalitarian structure of the previous group; there is permanent social hierarchy based around the redistribution of surplus crops, and each group has its local permanent chief, whose title is inherited from generation to generation. This arrangement, they feel, gives them the security they need to pursue their agricultural lifestyle without threat of famine; for the chief maintains the group's relationship with the gods of agricultural bounty.

* * *

Scene Three:

A wooded hilltop in early summer

Time:

About 850 years ago

A small group of men, perhaps five to ten, have come to the crest of the dune for a single purpose: to work the quartz cobbles they have obtained from the river three-quarters kilometer to the north into tools. They sit separated from one another by about seven meters, far enough that the razor-sharp chips flying from one worker's knapping do not endanger the others, but close enough to be in hailing distance in the event hostile groups are sighted from the hillcrest. For these have become warlike groups, with populations large enough to contest prime agricultural lands. Johnson #1 is far from these; most populations during this period have concentrated along the coast, where the most fertile lands are, as well as the clam flats. It is only about five kilometers from the nearest Wampanoag settlement at Titicut; but the men are concerned about raids from their perennial rivals, the Massawachuseog and the Narraganset; and there have been recent rumors of Mohawks raiding this far east.

As each man works the recalcitrant quartz, an oval-shaped scatter of flakes, chunks, and tools broken in the process of manufacture forms. When they have completed their task, the men leave this waste material behind, along with some of their hammerstones, and depart for their permanent settlements along the coast.

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Scene Four:

A lonely cottage in the woods, in late fall

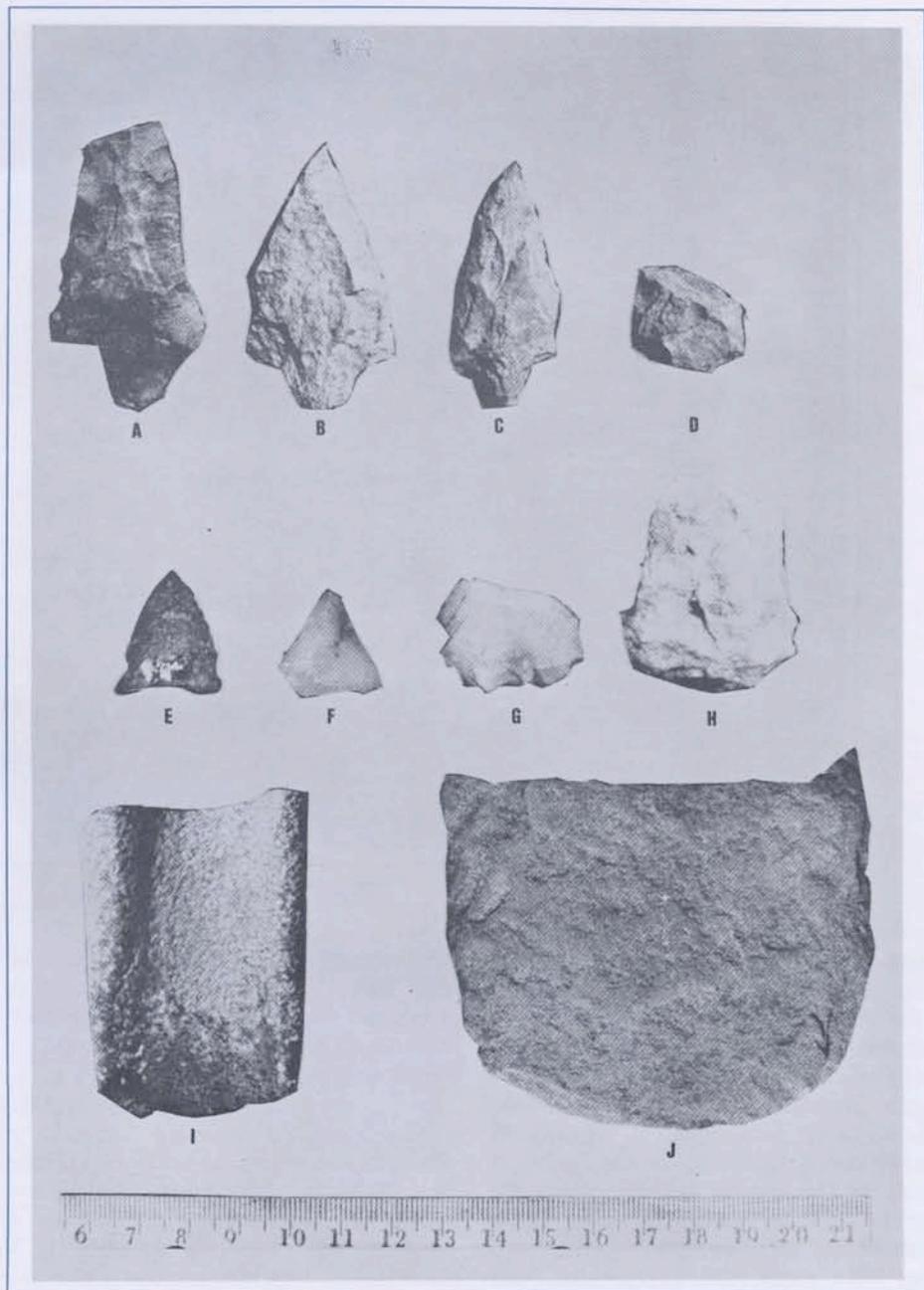
Time:

About 175 years ago

We can today, perhaps, sympathize with Nathaniel Preshoe. He is not, to say the least, making it in Massachusetts. Thirty years ago, his maternal grandfather, the wealthy landowner, Zebulon Field of Taunton, had deeded to his father Peter Preshoe a tract of land on the edge of that town at the latter's marriage, as part of his mother Elizabeth's dowry. With it came a small set of the Field family's English (and imitation Chinese) teacups and saucers. But Peter Preshoe's farming venture never succeeded: it was too far from the center of town, too far even from the nearest road, for goods to travel easily to market. And Peter died young, leaving his widow and infant son to eke out an existence on the edges of the swamp which to this day bears the name of Hockomock, the dreaded Indian god of the

underworld. Superstitions abound concerning this low-lying area, with its nightly methane emissions and ghostly associations. Faced with economic hardship, apparent abandonment by the wealthier portion of her family, and above all the general eeriness of the haunted swamp, Elizabeth goes quietly, gradually, and completely insane. Legends of the mad-woman of Hockomock Swamp may still be collected today.

So Nathaniel, at age 25 still unmarried, builds a small cottage on the sandy knoll half a kilometer away from his father's house (and that far away from the swamp) -- just to have a place to get away from the intolerable conditions at home. The house is poorly constructed: just a wood frame and a chimney chinked with mud daub, no cellar. Here he attempts to continue his father's half-hearted attempt at farming. He has brought with him only a little of his mother's tea service; and in general his cottage is less well-endowed than that from which he moved. Most of his ceramics are of strictly local manufacture. We learn of his marriage and fathering of a daughter, Mary, from the latter's gravestone in the Field family cemetery, dated 1832. There are also some vague company records indicating that he may have attempted to mine the local bog iron from the swamp area and process it into usable metal. But his efforts are to no avail; the Preshoes soon disappear from all town records. The best that can be said about Nathaniel is that hard times did not drive him to drink; and he seems to have been but a moderate smoker. Perhaps it is merely that he could not afford much in the way of these pleasures. But by about 1840, the cottage burned, and the site was abandoned; the bricks of the chimney were plowed under or buried in pits, and the site returned to forest.



Prehistoric Artifacts from Johnson #1

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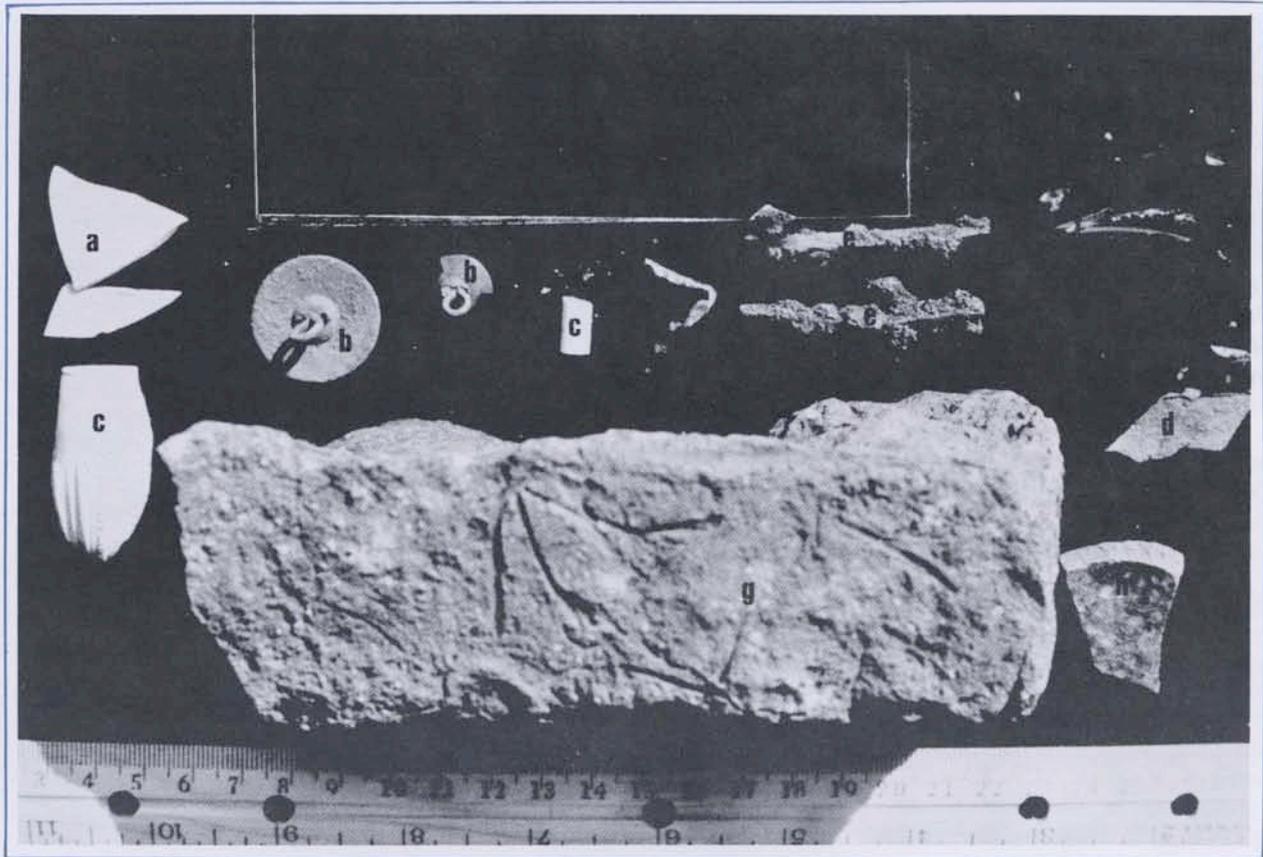
Scene Five:

A wooded rise, in mid-summer

Time:

1-3 years ago

A small but intrepid group of students from Bridgewater State College, under the author's direction, walk onto Johnson #1 site carrying screens, shovels, trowels, short-handled hoes, tape measures, brushes, and notebooks. They have come here as part of Bridgewater's Public Archaeology Concentration, and are taking part in a five-week summer field school in



Historic Artifacts from Johnson #1

Archaeological Investigation of Prehistoric Sites in New England. The site has been chosen for excavation because it lies just outside the right-of-way for a major highway, and was discovered in 1977 by a team from Brown University's Public Archaeology Laboratory in advance of construction. However, Brown's contract with the Department of Public Works did not permit them to excavate outside of the right-of-way, so a cooperative arrangement has been made with Bridgewater State College for the field schools to be trained here. It is considered likely by all parties, given past experience, that once the highway is built the land values adjacent to it will increase to the point where development, and with it destruction of the site and its contents, will become inevitable.

The students excavate carefully-measured 1.5 meter squares at intervals throughout the site, scraping away the soils with trowels and short-handled hoes and measuring in the remains of past cultures which they find. All the information is recorded on forms for later analysis. The site is a productive one; over 300 artifacts--projectile points, knives, scrapers, drills, a gouge, stone ornaments, pottery--and over 5000 flakes from the three prehistoric occupations; and in excess of 25,000

historic artifacts are recovered in one fall and three summer dig seasons. More important than this, their careful excavation techniques have permitted the retrieval of information which permits the site to be fitted into a regional framework, enabling archeologists to generate a model of continuous, though sporadic occupation, and the forces which shaped it, throughout southern New England. This type of reconstruction can help us all better to understand ourselves and our relationship to the land in which we live; the past successes and failures of its occupants inform us of our own very human strengths and weaknesses, and permit us to plan wisely for the future. For example, we can see the effect that long-term climatic fluctuations had upon populations in the region, and anticipating such in the future, can adjust our own adaptations accordingly. We are also faced with a series of cultures in the region who, for almost their entire duration, subsisted in peace with one another and in harmony with their environment. Surely this is an example we could do well to contemplate in the late 20th century. It seems to this author, at least, that we desperately need models of such cultures, if we ourselves are to survive the crises of our own making in this region--let alone the planet as a whole.



Dr. Curtiss Hoffman holds a Ph.D. from Yale University (1974) in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures. He is currently President of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society and is active in field excavation on sites in Canton and Westborough. He has co-authored a proposal for a Peace Studies Concentration in Anthropology at Bridgewater which is currently under review.